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SUBJECT: ROK PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE PARK GEUN-HYE: CAN SHE RETURN HOME TO THE BLUE HOUSE?

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Opposition presidential hopeful Park Geun-hye, currently second in all presidential polls with about 20 percent support, is the first woman to run for president in Korea. As former President Park Chung-hee's daughter, she earns votes from those who are nostalgic for the double digit economic growth of President Park's rule (1961-1979) and loses votes from those who remember the injustices of her father's authoritarian reign. She successfully led the main opposition Grand National Party (GNP) from March 2004 until June 2006 to a surprisingly good result in the National Assembly elections in April 2004 and multiple victories in subsequent local and by-elections. Her popularity peaked after, despite being attacked during a speech and hospitalized, she heroically left her hospital bed and went directly to campaign. Her inspiring performance led the GNP to a sweeping victory in the May 31 local elections. She lost both her parents to assassination in the 1970s and has never married. As a presidential candidate, Park's clean image and devotion to her country have won her a solid base of conservative support, but she remains well behind the leading GNP candidate Lee Myung-bak. End Summary

Formative Years

¶2. (SBU) Former GNP Chair Park Geun-hye was born February 2, 1952 and raised in the Blue House from the age of 9. Park's mother made every effort to offer Park a normal life, sending her to public schools and allowing her to ride the tram like other children. According to her official bio, she spent her early years, "learning traditional arts and living a quiet life observing great events." Her mother is credited with ensuring Park had the best education. After hearing a distinguished American visitor to the Blue House say that engineering was the key to Korea's future, Park decided to major in engineering. When she graduated from prestigious Sogang University with a degree in electrical engineering, she was one of a handful of women with such a degree.

Mother's Assassination

¶3. (SBU) After graduating from Catholic Sogang University in 1974, Park went to France for further study. In August of 1974, her mother was killed in a North Korean assassination plot by a Japanese-Korean on then President Park Chung-hee. Park Geun-hye returned home after her mother's death and as the president's eldest daughter, Park served as acting first lady from 1974 to 1979.

Father's Assassination

¶4. (SBU) On October 26, 1979, her father was assassinated by his KCIA chief. When Park Geun-hye learned of her father's death, her first reaction was apparently to ask, "Is the DMZ all right?" Some believe Park Chung-hee was grooming his eldest daughter to be president, although there is no evidence to support this claim. During the ensuing Chun Doo-hwan regime, Park's personal life was difficult as she was shadowed by the KCIA and many of her confidants were sent to hard-time prisons and even tortured.

Preparing for the Blue House? 17 Years of Solitude

¶5. (SBU) From late 1979 until late 1996, Park lived a largely solitary life. She dealt with the shock of both her parents' deaths and spent much of her time dealing with her own grief. As the family head, Park also had a number of serious problems. Her brother suffered serious drug addiction and was arrested on several occasions. Her sister had a difficult divorce during this time. Park Geun-hye worked mostly at home although she did hold the chairperson position at Daegu's Youngnam University during this period. In 1992, she wrote in her diary, "If I were to choose, I might choose death over a life like this again."

¶6. (SBU) She spent a considerable amount of her time with Yukyoung Foundation and the Saemaeum Hospital, charitable foundations established by her father. She also held a controversial position as head of the Jangsu Scholarhip Foundation that was founded with Busan Ilbo newspaper stock

"given" -- possibly under pressure -- to the foundation by Busan Ilbo's founder. Since she started work with Girl Scouts of Korea in 1974 and she became involved in various welfare projects during the 70s and 80s, Park has always put a strong emphasis on charitable work.

Step Back into the Spotlight

¶7. (SBU) In 1996 Park joined the New Korea Party (the Grand National Party predecessor party) and became an Assemblywoman representing Daegu through by-elections in 1998. She said she returned to public view to "save the country." In speeches Park says that she was motivated by the economic crisis of 1997 and wanted to "reform the party system and the overall political environment."

Campaign Trail

¶8. (SBU) Park officially declared her candidacy in October 2006 but has been working on her campaign since she stepped down in June 2006 from her position as Chairman of the GNP. Her popularity peaked in May 2006 after a 50-year-old man slashed her with a small knife, causing a 10-centimeter wound on her face that required 60 stitches and hours of surgery. Her well-publicized first words after the attack were, "I am all right. Don't overreact," which helped sweep the GNP to victory across the nation.

¶9. (SBU) In January 2007, Park put her campaign into high gear with veiled and not-so-veiled attacks at front-runner Lee Myung-bak. She has had a series of high profile speeches laying out her policy positions and she has even changed her trademark hairstyle. (Note: Her previous hairstyle was identical to that of her mother's. Her current style is much more modern. End Note) Her speaking style is straightforward and cautious. While some pundits criticize her for a lack of dynamism in her speaking style, even her detractors agree that she has a "certain charisma."

¶10. (SBU) In 1975 eight students who struggled against Park's rule were sentenced to death on trumped up charges of

violating the National Security Law and treason. The eight were executed less than 24 hours after the trial. Recently, a court revisited the cases and declared the eight activists innocent. Park Geun-hye was asked to comment on the case. She replied that the case was only being dealt with now for political reasons and she had already apologized for any injustices committed when she was in the Blue House.

¶11. (SBU) Park is now in the United States, hoping to shore up her image as a leader on a bigger stage. While former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak leads all polls with his focus on the economy and his proposed "MBnomics," Park seeks, according to advisors, to show she is a capable leader who can be trusted with the economy and the country. She emphasizes in her speeches that the GNP should choose not just the candidate who can win the primary, but the candidate who can withstand scrutiny and attacks from the press and progressive candidates in the general election.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Park Geun-hye impresses all who meet her and her complete devotion to her country is unquestionable. While she is running a strong second in all polls and cannot be dismissed, many, even in the GNP, say that Korea may not be ready yet to elect a female president. They probably have a point, because she is running 20-30 points behind Lee. Still, even if she loses this time, Park will remain a key figure in Korean politics for many years to come.

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